

CONNECTIONS TO INDIA



After spending their entire lives in India, my parents, Ranjit Bawa and Manroop Ghai immigrated to New Jersey from Delhi just four months after getting married. I didn't know why, and in the 18 years I lived with them, I never thought to ask about their journey and how their lives changed moving across the world.

I felt that it was about time.

When did thoughts of coming to the US first occur to you? How did you make the decision?

RANJIT: The day came where my boss asked, “Would you like to be relocated to the US? There’s an open position there.” In my head, I thought, ‘Wow! A promotion, and I get to move to the United States!’

MANROOP: Though I had advanced in my work in India, Ranjit was earning more so I didn’t question for a second whether I’d move with him to the US, and if the roles were reversed he too would have moved so I could advance in my career.

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How did parents, family, friends, others, react to your decision and did they have any influence over it?

MANROOP: My family was quite upset that I’d be leaving for a whole new continent. Of course, I was nervous to be leaving them; my family was my whole life and all I had known for most of it. However, they were excited for Ranjit and understood why I was making the move with him.

What were major changes you experienced once in the US?

MANROOP: After some months of doing busywork in a small shop, I decided to find work that aligned with my interests. [Finding work] back in India was simpler; there was a community I could turn to for help. Here, I knew no one. So, a big change was the independence I needed to reach my goals. In Newark [NJ], I went place to place handing out resumes, handing out at least 300 before getting my first interview.

Having people who help with maintaining the household is another common thing in India that was very different from the life of independence in the US. At my first job it snowed heavily in February and the owner had told me to shovel the snow off the sidewalk. You might think it's an easy, straightforward task, but until this moment I had done zero physical work in my life; I really felt that I was in a new world now.

“...what I thought was a ‘promotion’ wasn’t a promotion at all...Maybe I was just distracted by the shiny idea that was the USA.”

RANJIT: The realization that what I thought was a ‘promotion’ wasn’t a promotion at all was tough. I learned that being so far from the head office, it was hard to climb the ranks. Maybe I was just distracted by the shiny idea that was the USA.

What has surprised you the most about life in America?

MANROOP: Once you come here, you can't go back — the country grows on you, the lifestyle grows on you and you get used to living in a nuclear set up of family. Living in the extended family set up is fun, but it feels too complicated. I can definitely say life here is simpler, at least for me.

RANJIT: Out here, it feels like hard work is more proportional to success. In India, there's lots of "red tape": bureaucracy, more people, more corruption. You have to get lucky to succeed. In the US, with more opportunities and a fairer game, reaching your goals seems more in your control.

**“Because my kids are
American, I feel a sense of
belonging here.”**

What experiences have made you feel “most American”?

MANROOP: Because my kids are American, I feel a sense of belonging here.

RANJIT: The extreme degree of patriotism felt here and the many flags hung all around streets and buildings makes me feel more American. I also think immigrants have a different sort of appreciation for America, compared to locals who are born here. Because we have seen more of the outside world, we appreciate how this country works, even though it's far from perfect.

What experiences make you feel “most Indian”?

RANJIT: Going to the Gurudwara (the Sikh temple), meeting my friends in the Indian community, and celebrating Indian holidays are all things that make me think of home.

MANROOP: My faith definitely connects me to India because that’s where it comes from. Also Bollywood movies and music are things I love and definitely remind me of home.



Though neither of my parents had planned on a permanent life in the US, they have added a new facet to who they are. I look forward to discovering more about their immigration story and how their Indian and American identities have shaped them to date. ■

VIRAL



CHINATOWN

in the early days of
New York's chinatown
women coalesced into
a garment district
a labor movement
fast yellow hands forming
shapes that became metaphor

darting needle, dancing thread
the easier sewn bundles
'sih yauh gai,'
could earn you more—
steam-press a dress
a young woman can wear
while falling in love

my parents came to America
later that century
masters degrees tucked into
crisp shirts alongside
white colleagues—
my mother wove capacitors and diodes into green schematics
so that electricity can speak to electricity
in the palm of your hand

our Chinglish stitches
hyphenate space
between PowerPoints
and pork feet at the Super 88
i learned to sew,
after four years of family-paid
private arts education
writing English poetry about
how fast bamboo grows—
a childhood memory so foreign to me
i am a tourist within it

i only know how swiftly
luxury condos materialize—
entire groves, several feet a day
a force to be reckoned with
a magnet for trust-fund whites and
crazy rich Chinese
as trade war makes headlines

fabric taught me namelessness
the ways some people are artists
and others workers
needle taught me how two sides holding together with tension
can almost create the shape of a story

no one is surprised to see
slanted eyes in corporate America
yellowness weaves
convenient allegiance across lines—
professionals with Macbooks extract capital from silicon pockets,
are also the adopted daughter
of a Manhattan shopkeeper
placing her hand on my shoulder—
a touch that feels familiar

ni de lao jia zai naer?
“My mom is from anhui”—

extra bag is free, she insists
we are kin now, and in Chinese
“home” and “family”
are the same sound
over and under—
yi shang yi xia—
hide stitch, cut thread
remembering a thousand migrations
that aren't one's own ■



DRIFTING KITES

Someday, even the kites will fall
and shred themselves
into tears mid-flight, but

until then, Mother speaks like a
god unto herself, a queen
reigning in another kingdom.

Mother speaks like a criminal, clips
the clandestine rules
of another language.

Her eyes are seaside grottos,
so dark they hide secrets,
inkwells that a brush could

dip into them and trace her words
into drifting summer kites,
somewhere becoming light.

■

GRANDMOTHER



food

food
food

food
as

every
Tuesday
morning

simmer
until it
smells like
home

pinch of salt
splash of vinegar
knob of ginger
dollop of cream
spoonful of spice

Jam & Cheese

Jam & Cheese

e

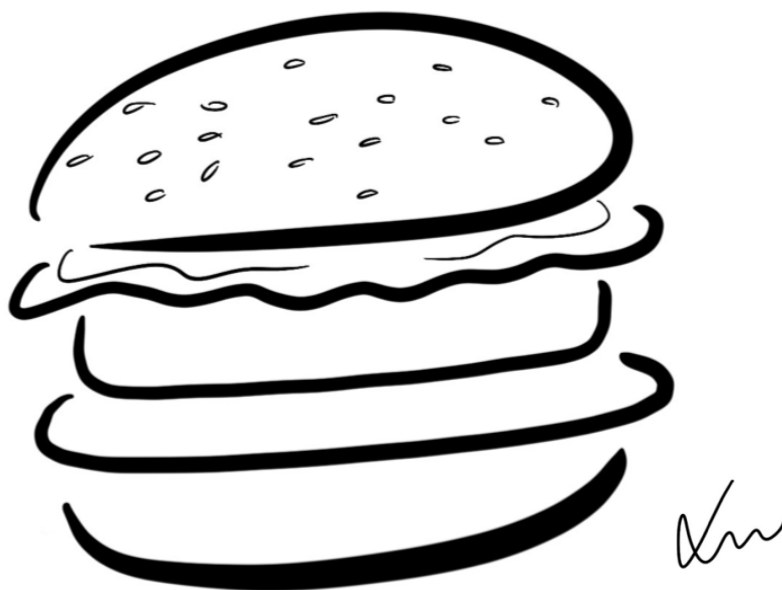
THE FOUR SOUPS OF VIETNAMESE AMERICA



BURGER

being told that
the only time your parents
“splurged”
was on one \$1 burger from McDonald’s
on your birthday each year...

that you ate while they sat and watched. ■



A CHINESE AMERICAN LOVE



Love is...
the sight of a table piled high with a dozen
different dishes
loud greetings in 3 different dialects
25 relatives piled in a crammed apartment once a
year
(including the 1 cousin that made the “10 hour
drive” back from college in 8 hours)
the smiling face of my grandma, always happy to
feed us
the hours of labor and days of prep work from
arthritic hands
red envelopes exchanged, Lunar New Year’s chants
recited

Love is...

the stockpile of frozen dumplings and sticky rice reserved
for me when I leave home for MIT
my mother, who has never cooked before COVID,
learning family recipes to remind us of happier days
my father's long drive to deliver Lunar New Year's food
to me the first time I wasn't there in person
the 2-hour long lesson my grandmother gave me on how
to properly wrap zong zi my first winter break home
the countless fresh cucumbers and vegetables bestowed
upon me from a container garden on an apartment
terrace

I love by...

video chatting my grandmother in quarantine to show
her the neighborhood plant store
sending pictures of family delicacies butchered by my
college cooking skills
hopelessly pouring over dozens of English-language
recipes for the food of my childhood
insisting that my grandparents' cooking far surpasses
every restaurant
vowing to come home someday to take care of my older
relatives

An immigrant's love for his or her children is sacrifice.

An immigrant's child's love is one day realizing that

sacrifice and -

unprompted -

paying it back.

▪

YOU ARE OUR JEWEL,
MY BROTHER, & MEXI-
CAN, SO YOU CAN DO
ANYTHING, HERMANO!

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מִי
אֵרֶב
שׁוֹט,
גְּרָאנְדֶּפָּא
?

おじいちゃん



この区域は
駐車禁止です
いりてくれ
注意

西入口に
DOGS
PARKING PROHIBITED



お元気？



おじいちゃん、

お元気？

朝ごはん、いつもの食パンとイチゴジャム？
おばあちゃんの仏壇には、どの花を添えた？
おはようって言った？
返事は風が運んでくれた言葉？
それとも風鈴の音色？

庭の紫陽花は、もう紫の花を咲かせている？
学校に行く道の田んぼは、もう緑に染まっている？
もしかして、待っている？

海の向こうのおじいちゃん、お元気？

Ojiichan, Grandpa,

How are you?

Did you have a slice of shokupan toast with strawberry jam
— the regular — for breakfast?
What flowers did you leave for Obaachan at her altar today?
Did you remember to tell her good morning?
Did the breeze carry her response?
Or was it the melody of the wind chimes?

Have the hydrangea in the garden bloomed purple yet?
Have the rice fields on the path to school sprouted green?
Have you been waiting?

To my ojiichan across the ocean, how are you?



RAMEN
מאכל



סמל
סופר

Sandwiched between two grandparents born out of two polar universes, I acted as their translator, my words unable to replace intonation and intimacy. Yet when we sipped matzo ball soup or slurped ramen noodles, what made us different

FLOATED

פוט

with the steam from our separate bowls, swirling together.

■

